# "Bear in mind...and do not bite the hand that feeds You". Institutionalized Self-Censorship and Its Impact on Journalistic Practice in Post communist Countries—the Case of Bulgaria

TRIFONOVA PRICE, Lada



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**18.** ***"Bear in mind … and do not bite the hand that feeds you": Institutionalized self-censorship and its impact on journalistic practice in post-communist countries—the case of Bulgaria***

*Lada Trifonova Price, Lecturer, Sheffield Hallam University, U.K.*

**Introduction**

The collapse of Bulgaria's communist regime in 1989 triggered a process of democratization and rapid economic reforms that led to fundamental changes in its political and media system. However, transformation has not always been for the better, nor has democratization been easy and straightforward (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015). Bulgaria has struggled to transform itself from a repressive state to a fledging democratic society. A brief initial period of unprecedented media freedom in the early 1990s allowed its media, like many others in Eastern Europe, to transform from a propaganda machine to a catalyst for democratic change. However, the last two decades have witnessed constant efforts to bring the media to heel by turning it into a powerful tool in the hands of newly emerging political and business elites (Voltmer, 2013). The consensus among scholars is that since their release from strict communist censorship, the media in many post-communist countries have simply become mouthpieces of the rich and powerful (Cheterian, 2009; Garcia, 2015; Voltmer, 2013).

Early research on post-communist societal and media transformation (Huntington, 1991; Fukuyama, 1992) assumed that the alliance of democracy and a market economy would inevitably lead to the establishment of a Western-type media system where media and journalists achieve significant independence similar to that enjoyed by their Western counterparts. However, the free market quickly evolved into a mechanism that "fuses the circuits of freedom and critical disclosure" (Curran & Park, 2000, p. 14), mainly because the new media owners followed their own political

and business agendas and were unafraid to use their power to censor criticism of governments and corporate partners.

Rapid liberalization and deregulation of the media market after 1989 brought into existence numerous publications, allowing some degree of pluralism and freedom of speech (Raycheva, 2009). From being entirely state-owned, all media outlets became private except for the two national TV and radio broadcasters Bulgarian National Television (BNT) and Bulgarian National Radio (BNR). Introduction of new content, styles, and formats, including online versions of major media outlets, ensured that—at least on the surface—post-communist newspapers and electronic media had nothing in common with their communist-era predecessors.

Nevertheless, harsh competition and market pressure over the past 20 years, including the 2008-2013 global financial crisis have cut advertising income by half (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2016). In recent years, print newspapers have experienced a sharp drop in circulation and trust, while the advertising market, along with the Bulgarian economy, stagnated, bringing the print media to the brink of bankruptcy (International Research and Exchanges Board , 2014; CSD, 2016). Still, despite severe financial difficulties, print media continue to wield significant political influence (CSD, 2016). Often described as "truncheons," local oligarchs use tabloid newspapers, online news sites, and television channels to exert influence, destroy the reputations of political and business opponents, and manipulate public opinion (IREX, 2017, p. 30). Political interference with the media also plays a major role in the dynamic of the country's media landscape, especially in the case of national broadcasters fully dependent on the state budget, turning them into trophies to be handed over to whoever wins the election (Jakubowicz, 2012).

Since Bulgaria became a full member of the European Union in 2007, its media and journalists have witnessed a steady deterioration of freedom of opinion and expression. The country has also fallen further in the annual Freedom of the Press Index compiled by Reporters without Borders. From 51st place in 2007, it ranked at 109th in 2017, making it the lowest-ranked EU member "due to an environment dominated by corruption and collusion between media, politicians, and oligarchs" (Reporters without Borders, or RWB, 2017). Freedom House's annual Freedom of the Press report (2017) rates Bulgaria overall as "free" but its press system as only "partly free." Among the worst problems regularly noted by RWB, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), and other international organizations are attacks on and harassment of journalists, especially investigative reporters. Serious threats against journalists from *Bivol*, an investigative outlet, prompted the CPJ to issue an open letter asking the prime minister to urgently investigate the threats and ensure the safety of the reporters (CPJ, 2015). The state uses its national security agency to silence journalists and critical media outlets through coercion to reveal sources, spying, threats, and blackmail (Trifonova Price, 2014). This not only amounts to censorship but also leads to widespread self-censorship, avoidance of certain topics, and dulling of criticism (Blagov, Spassov, Spahr, & Arndt, 2014). In such an unstable environment, editors and journalists must carefully decide whether and what to publish or broadcast, which in turn shapes how people understand and respond to the social reality around them (Voltmer, 2013). As an active participant in the communication process, the media require a certain degree of independence to make informed choices about their output. Heavy censorship and control can turn the media into tools in the hands of others (Voltmer, 2013).

**Research questions**

The research questions this chapter addresses are: How does censorship manifest itself in the media and in Bulgarian journalistic practice post-communism? Do journalists self-censor and, if so, why? And what is the impact of different types of censorship and self-censorship on journalism and media freedom in Bulgaria?

**Method**

This discussion is based on face-to-face interviews with 31 journalists from a range of national media outlets, conducted in 2009 and 2010. The researcher asked participants to take stock of the transformation of the post-communist media landscape. Twenty-nine interviewees were practicing journalists before the end of the communist regime in 1989 and continued their media careers without interruption. Most had direct experience of media and censorship before the regime collapsed and thus could directly compare their present practices and environment.[i] Only two participants began working as journalists with the start of democratization, although both grew up during communism. The sample was drawn to include journalists from all types of traditional and new media, including state-operated and privately owned outlets. The sample included journalists from 20 electronic, print and online media, who were recruited via snowballing and relying on "informal sponsorship" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 60) where former colleagues vouched for the interviewer and provided access to and contacts with other journalists. The common denominator for selecting participants was substantial first-hand journalism experience of the changes in the post-communist media landscape.

The participants were 12 broadcast journalists from each major public and private broadcaster (BNR, BNT, and four private TV channels); 12 from the main national print media with offices in the capital, Sofia; two from online media; and five freelancers who have worked across a number of print and broadcast media. Due to

the small size of the media market, identifying details have been limited so interviewees can remain anonymous. Since democratization began, many journalists have been fired for expressing their views or for not complying with owners' demands. Anonymity allowed participants to candidly share their perceptions, views, and observations without fear of identification.

## Findings

### *Censorship versus freedom*

One of the most significant changes since the collapse of communism is the emergence of freedom of speech and expression. Asked whether freedom of speech and expression in Bulgaria exists post-communism, all interviewees agreed that it does, in contrast with the stringent party censorship of the past. However, many stated they had expected media freedom without any political and economic control and interference. Growing market pressure and financial dependency, arising from the inability of media organizations to earn sufficient revenue from sales and advertising to cover salaries and day-to-day costs, soon dispelled this "romantic" and "somewhat naive" illusion. Most editors increasingly rely on sponsorship and handouts from owners who bail them out when funds run out. The financial crisis of 2009 brought pressure on the media's financial and technological recourses and caused a collapse of the traditional business model (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2015). The absence of financial sustainability in turn allows oligarchic groups to accumulate a significant share of the media market and to acquire "an unprecedented level of political influence (including direct influence on the legislative, executive and judicial powers)" (CSD, 2016, p. 1). If the censor holds a monopoly position or belongs to an oligopoly of media barons, private censorship can make it very difficult or impossible to communicate critical and independent views (Barendt, 2009). Market censors can stifle genuine pluralism,

while further alienating marginalized groups in society (Stavljanin & Veljanovski, 2017).

All the interviewees noted that public and private media are too financially dependent on corporate or state sponsorship to take advantage of their right to report and investigate on the public's behalf. Interviewees described their freedom and independence as "relative," "only on paper," and "measured." For example, journalists are encouraged to criticize certain issues, individuals, and groups. Yet, they cannot touch other subjects that are taboo since reporting on these can hurt the business interests of their owners, their political friends, and business partners.

Journalists believe the media are free because the Constitution guarantees the every citizen's right to receive and disseminate information. However, this fundamental right and the official abolition of communist censorship does not ensure freedom of speech. According to most interviewees, the existing patronage and mutually beneficial patron-client relationships among a close-knit political and media elite set boundaries on what journalists can and cannot report. That makes direct censorship unnecessary. In other words, media and journalists depend on the whims of those who pay the bills. This quote from an editor- in-chief of a daily newspaper illustrates this view:

> If before 1989 we could speak of total censorship, where everyone knew what you could say and what you could not, now we have different "pockets" or "nests" of censorship… The problem is that if the media owners work with governments, if they have common interests, this puts the media in conflict of interest and affects the journalists' work. It means that particular media do not cover a topic if it may hurt the interests of the owner or if the owner is accused of any irregularities.

Many interviewees noted that corporate and government censorship are often indistinguishable due to the fusion of economic and political power in Bulgaria, where the informal alliance among economic and political elites shapes the media system (Curran & Park, 2000). Among the most constrictive types of censorship is the formation of media outlets as political rather than commercial investments by business groups, such as one operated by Delyan Peevski. His New Bulgarian Media Group owns six newspapers and controls nearly 80% of print media distribution (RWB, 2017). The groups direct funds to media outlets in exchange for positive coverage on behalf of the ruling party. The party, in turn, is obliged to deliver favors such as lobbying for laws and regulations or securing non-transparent administrative decisions that not only benefit the investors financially but also guarantee them a high level of political protection. Where the party fails to deliver on its commitments, funding immediately ceases and is replaced by smear campaigns and extensive negative coverage. A senior newspaper reporter explains how such schemes work:

> Very often agreement for payments is completed by the editor-in-chief, who has a circle of political and business friends. They make a special agreement. The editor then tries very delicately to talk journalists into covering a specific topic, for example. And sometimes journalists are not aware of the agreement. The editor-in-chief tells them he has some very important news, which he has learned from his sources, and that "news" needs coverage.

Many interviewees described practices that are less "delicate"—editors impose an outright ban on a topic, and journalists who fail to comply are demoted or fired. Just over half the interviewees stated that they were fired or forced to resign at some point in their careers because of political or corporate pressure applied on them personally, via their editors and/or publishers, or through the directors of the national

broadcasters. Moreover, all interviewees who work or have worked in broadcasting experienced direct political interference from the government. The politically appointed directors of the national broadcasters apply pressure to demote or dismiss critical journalists. BNR is a high-profile example because of the high number of prominent radio journalists fired in its recent history, along with unfair dismissals of directors. As a result of direct political interference and full dependency on the state budget, BNR has significantly toned down its criticism of the government. BNT also depends on the state budget and, according to many interviewees, politicians interfere directly and silence critical journalists, as a senior BNT producer explains:

> I have been removed from beats as a reporter covering the government and I have been fired at the peak of my career. This was despite my being listed as one of the top 10 journalists in the world for that year and my work getting international recognition. This didn't stop them from firing me… The campaign against me in certain media involved total lies, fabrications of facts, manipulation of people, and all sorts of ways to discredit me personally and professionally.

Many others corroborated this view and noted that an effective way to bully and pressure journalists into self-censorship is to discredit them in smear campaigns in the tabloid press. Those campaigns known as *kompromat* usually release fake facts and unverified rumors about journalists. *Kompromats* are often timed to inflict the most damage to the target's reputation. Recently some public figures and journalists successfully sued the *Monitor* newspaper, owned by Peevski's group for libel and defamation. The newspaper accused two civil society activists of paying protesters against the prosecutor general, a claim that was not proven in court (IREX, 2017).

*Political, financial censorship, and taboo topics*

Interviewees pointed to the existence of topics that their media outlets either avoid or do not "fully address." Two of the main reasons are topics that interfere with media owners' business and political interests and lead to fear of violence and aggression toward journalists. All interviewees said topics or investigations that may interfere with or hurt owners' business interests or political agendas are "no-go zones," with an "invisible thin line" that cannot be crossed, depending on the outlet. This is because most media owners are believed to belong to informal circles, described as "networks of influence." These networks consist of politicians, oligarchs, media owners, crime figures, and even prominent journalists. A prime example is one of the most powerful networks operated by the notorious parliamentarian and media baron Peevski, his sponsor and Corporate Commercial Bank director Tsvetan Vassilev, and TV host-turned politician Nikolay Barekov (*The Economist*, 2014). Authorities investigated Barekov's political party, "Bulgaria without Censorship," for receiving improper financing and for its leader's ostentatious lifestyle (Capital, 2016). Journalists reportedly offer their services to the highest bidder, and those individuals are distinguished by their "high material status, their fast rise to wealth, the luxurious villas, and the expensive cars," all manifesting their close links to the people in power (IREX, 2017, p. 31). Personal and informal communications within these networks have established close, friendly relationships among political actors and some journalists (Pfetsch & Voltmer, 2012). In other words, many journalists are part of the same elite they are supposed to scrutinize. These networks exhibit strong cultures of "favor exchanges," described by a senior TV producer:

> Since around 2002 there are established networks of prosecutors, businessmen, media owners, and politicians, and everything is done on the principle "if you do this for me, I will do that for you" or "let's squash so-and-

so and destroy so-and-so…" Those are very complicated relationships, which are very difficult for most journalists to negotiate.

On a practical level, exchanges of favors are common, according to this daily newspaper reporter: "The way we have to operate usually means reaching a bargain" such as 'we will give you information but you have to say good things about us.'" Most journalists are resigned to informal, non-transparent arrangements that impact their daily reporting practices as "everyday reality." Journalists dubbed this phenomenon as *zadkulisie*, which translates as "behind the scenes." For most participants, the word represents corrupt media, politics, and business working together to undermine democracy and severely threaten media freedom.

A former newspaper editor-in-chief sums up the complicated dynamics of the media landscape as a "minefield where hidden dangers make practicing journalism extremely difficult":

> Everyone looks not to step on each other's toes, the government's toes, so-and-so's toes and so on.… On the one hand, they are obliged to put pressure on some people, and on the other hand they have to be careful not to make unnecessary enemies. This precarious position is nothing else but censorship on the press—not directly applied censorship but the true economic reality of the Bulgarian press.

Direct political interference pales in comparison with the oligarchy and local media barons' financial control of the media through which they have significantly expanded their media portfolios. Several journalists characterized those newspapers as nothing more that "propaganda sheets" for their owners.

*Violence, threats, and self-censorship*

Most interviewees experienced direct pressure from politicians and business executives through threatening phone calls and private conversations in which they are asked "why they wrote this or that." Intimidation includes being bullied and shouted at in public, being followed, receiving messages via third parties, hints about what can be done to them if they don't stop investigating, and tapping their phones. Non-governmental organizations such as RWB and CPJ note that aggression against journalists is all too common. Criminal and mafia-like organizations and local business barons dictate what is and is not reported by targeting journalists who dare expose illegal activities. Often, journalists believe crime organizations work in tandem with legitimate institutions such as police and security services. A senior investigative reporter at a daily newspaper says:

> I have been threatened directly. I am very careful not to have a telephone at home because they used to check my calls. In 2005 or 2006 someone called my neighbour to pass a message to me that they will put a bomb in my flat.

Most interviewees know colleagues who have been beaten, stabbed, punched, kicked, verbally abused by criminals, or had their cars torched. In 2006, a TV investigative reporter barely escaped with his life after a bomb exploded in his flat following his investigation into prison corruption (CPJ, 2006; Novinite, 2006). Recent examples include the brutal beating of the owner of local news website *Zad Kulisite*[ii] (CPJ, 2016; IREX, 2017). The effect of such aggression is cause for major concern for participants, as fear of retribution and the impunity of perpetrators create a chilling effect on investigative reporting. Journalists appear resigned to the fact that censorship is "not necessarily the all-seeing eye and iron fist of a distant authority which towers over its subjects" (Keene, 1991, pp. 38-39). Instead, censorship has

been made redundant by self-censorship, which constantly reminds them not to go too far and warns them what is at risk: jobs, livelihoods, and future careers.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a familiar pattern has emerged from many third-wave democracies such as Bulgaria. First, their societies undergo a volatile, painful, and turbulent process of transformation, "a figurative rollercoaster of emotions, fears, and expectations" (Hadland, 2015, p. 4). Second, a new political breakthrough allows a brief but exciting period of almost unlimited freedom for the press. The media find themselves fulfilling a dual function of not just transmitting information but also catalyzing political change. A survey of 102 journalists, just three months after these changes began in 1989, found they believed the press had freed itself from most communist taboos and restrictions in that very short time (Ognianova & Scott, 1997). Two decades later, a survey of 100 journalists showed that new and sophisticated methods of regulatory and market censorship severely restricted media and journalistic freedom ever since the early years of democratization (Blagov et al., 2014). Political office and media ownership often combine as "mutually reinforcing resources of influence" (Voltmer, 2013, p. 225) on journalism. Third, in the final transitional stage, authorities, including the state and dominant elites, establish full control of their countries by subtly repressive practices. These include continuous assaults on media freedom through legal, political, and financial mechanisms that strike at the heart of hard-won journalistic freedom and independence (Hadland, 2015). Bulgarian journalists believe the main threat to media freedom and journalism is not direct state control or censorship but crippling financial and economic dependency on political, business, crime, and media elites. Few independent private media outlets are able or willing to hold power to account, while

those who do are punished with the withdrawal of advertising or sponsorship. The hands of public broadcaster journalists have long been tied by their full dependency on state funding, political appointments of their leadership, and firing of outspoken and critical journalists. At the same time, the public is deeply dissatisfied with the overall quality of the media in their country (IREX, 2017).

While some relative freedom of speech and expression exists post-communism, journalists still tread a difficult and sometimes dangerous path, most know exactly what they can and cannot say, publish or broadcast, and they are fully aware that their media outlets and livelihoods depend heavily on whomever provides with money to survive. As a result, negative trends plague the media landscape: widespread self-censorship, lack of pluralism, and a culture of fear.

Government, political, and corporate interference since 1989, along with growing financial dependency, are the main reasons today's journalists tend to view the media and journalists as no longer the positive force in society they once were, but as submissive, subservient, and failing to fulfil the purpose of being the fourth estate in Bulgarian society. On the contrary: Journalists have come full circle since the end of communism -- again being powerful instruments of the ruling elite.

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[i] Positions of journalists: Senior (Editor/Deputy or? Editor/Director): 16; Middle rank (Senior Reporter/Columnist/Presenter): 9; Junior (Reporter): 1; Freelance: 5. Sample consists of: six radio and six TV journalists; 12 newspaper journalists; two from online media and five freelance journalists.

[ii] Translated from Bulgarian as "Behind the Scenes."